

## Sex (Work) in the Classroom

### *How Academia Can Support the Sex Workers' Rights Movement*

KATE D'ADAMO

Over the last several years, the world's oldest profession has become academia's latest hot topic. As public debates, panels, workshops, books, and other media continue to increase the visibility of the sex trade, class time and sometimes entire curricula have sprung up to explore its various facets. Academics are constantly navigating the complex relationships they have with their subjects; through research and teaching, academics can operate as translators between the communities they study and a wider audience.

While socially conscious academics try to educate the public about the lived experiences of people trading sex, they often do so as people who do not identify as sex workers. Even for those who have traded sex, institutional discrimination and public stigma may keep even the proudest activist closeted once they are in line for tenure. Attempting to educate as an "outsider" can be a minefield of attempts not to reinforce the same power dynamics that keep communities marginalized. Too often, researchers, academics, and advocates who attempt to be "voices for the voiceless" instead reinforce the "voiceless" community's silence. As longtime sex worker advocate Ruth Jacobs (2014) notes, "Most people are voiceless because no one is letting them talk or listening to them when they do." The sex worker community<sup>1</sup> is no different.

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1. The term "sex worker," while contested, is nevertheless often employed without question. I would like to acknowledge that the term "sex worker" has a genesis and legacy, which has been applied to many individuals who do not identify as such. Many who exchange sex, including those who utilize the sex trade alongside a number of other informal resource exchanges, find the term alienating. They may not see themselves as workers, engaging in an industry, or part of the continued history of "sex work" as an identity and a political movement, all of which are valid personal stances. It is important to acknowledge and value these voices

Research that contains poorly translated experiences and decontextualized information frequently contributes to an audience with just enough information to do harm. Audiences, whether they are students, peers, or the public, may walk away from research believing that expertise resides in voyeurism and that limited scope is a sign of objectivity.

Yet, while they can cause harm, academics can also be instrumental in the larger changes sought by communities. Through their research, academics can identify and document patterns across populations, communities, and regions, and, more crucially, they can ensure that research resonates with decision makers who are not facing the same struggles as sex workers. That connection between research and policy lies at the core of structural change. Activists want solid and thoughtful research that they can harness in crafting advocacy. Thus, a researcher's ability to work with different populations, who have a range of barriers and challenges, and connect issues between movements and communities can make a positive contribution. Publishing, lecturing, and writing on stigmatized topics connects marginalized communities and activists to new, receptive audiences that they otherwise may never access. When research-community partnerships are built in an ethical and thoughtful manner, the result can be a mutually beneficial experience that can create new opportunities for everyone involved.

## Academics and Allies: Defining Roles

Throughout this chapter, I refer to two roles—academics and allies. Academics are people who are working from within an institutional setting to contribute to dialogue on a subject through research, writing, and teaching others.<sup>2</sup> Usually, academics attempt to make this contribution from a position of objectivity or from a sense of separateness. Allies, on the other hand,

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and the significance of their decisions not to employ this title. I use the term “sex worker” to apply to members of a heterogeneous group who are affected by the sex trade and, in some way, exchange sexual services for resources. In addition, the use of the term “community” is a loaded concept, and in this case I employ it to refer to the diverse population of those who are researched as individuals trading sex, regardless of where they fall in the constellation of choice, circumstance, or coercion.

2. The editors, reviewers, and I had long discussions about the changing role of the academic in a new marketplace that is dominated by and dependent on adjunct labor. Adjuncts often have fewer resources at their disposal to conduct research in a sustainable way, but they certainly are contributing to dialogue through teaching. Additionally, many adjuncts *do* carry out research specifically because they want to secure tenure. Frequently, this research is conducted on their own, without the benefit of internal or external funding, research assistants, or research leave. However, the underlying issue I raise here—that academics should be better allies—remains salient regardless of an investigator's tenure status or their engagement in research.

stand aligned or in solidarity with another group or community, to which they themselves do not belong, and actively demonstrate that commitment regularly. Allyship is an active role, and it takes constant work. Mia McKenzie, author of the well-known *Black Girl Dangerous* blog, notes:

“Ally” cannot be a label that someone stamps onto you—or, god forbid, that you stamp on to yourself—so you can then go around claiming it as some kind of identity. *It’s not an identity. It’s a practice.* It’s an active thing that must be done over and over again, in the largest and smallest ways, *every day*. (2013)

Allyship is an ongoing struggle, one that often has to be weighed against personal and professional challenges, especially for stigmatized and criminalized communities.

These two roles do not need to be exclusive. Academics’ methods of translation (research, publications, curricula, and teaching) can be powerful tools toward achieving social change. The process for building these tools must be constructed around a core of unified allyship—especially when stigmatized and criminalized communities are involved as the focus of these tools. The benefit that academics gain from their work is often clear and articulated. Whether that benefit is generating an additional research credit on a curriculum vitae, creating a popular course for the semester, or accessing a grant to conduct research, there is often a tangible outcome. Allyship in academia can simply mean that when an academic is working with a community to gain these benefits, that community also sees positive gains and outcomes. As any relationship must be built on mutual respect, community members must be just as in control of defining what that gain looks like as the academic partner is.

Allyship, though, will always be a challenging role to navigate, fraught with power imbalances that must be acknowledged and negotiated with mutual respect. It is also important to note that there is an ongoing debate about the concept of allyship, within both academic and activist communities. Activists, such as McKenzie (2013), worry that allyship is too often adopted as an identity unto itself by those in power without the accompanying action:

Allyship is not supposed to look like this, folks. It’s not supposed to be about you. It’s not supposed to be about your feelings. It’s not supposed to be a way of glorifying yourself at the expense of the folks you claim to be an ally to. It’s not supposed to be a *performance*. It’s supposed to be a way of living your life that *doesn’t* reinforce the same oppressive behaviors you’re claiming to be against.

The academics whom McKenzie and others criticize are those who proclaim themselves as allies without actively working to change the systemic and structural conditions that keep the populations they research or teach about stigmatized, criminalized, and otherwise marginalized.

Conversely, among academics, there is often discussion of a need to be “objective” in research.<sup>3</sup> There is a false assumption that allyship (or even a basic desire to support the communities that academics research) compromises an academic’s ability to do effective research. In each one of an academic’s roles—researcher, instructor, and colleague—it is essential to understand how being an ally does not inherently compromise one’s professionalism. Indeed, promoting a false sense of neutrality is more damaging. When researchers say they are allies, they are not giving carte blanche support for all aspects of the sex industry or for everything espoused by someone who has traded sex. Allyship is simply the recognition that researchers do not have the right to speak for that population or to be the primary directors of change for that community.

The “myth of neutrality” allows an academic to divest responsibility of the impact that their work has on a community. If an academic is intent on their work being put into the public consciousness, they must be diligent in making sure that its impact is not harmful. Regardless of whether or not academics acknowledge the effects of their work, they are inevitably making themselves parties to the policy and advocacy conversations that affect the daily lives of the researched. Academics who choose to disseminate information about communities to which they do not belong are inserting themselves into the lives of those communities in ways that will have ripple effects. Laws may be passed, false information might be repeated, and conclusions may be drawn using that information. This position and its outcomes are not neutral, but they can be positive.

If there is one central tenet of allyship that drives most of these recommendations, it is that in every space possible, a seat at the table should be created and the weight of that space properly held. Communities should be the drivers of research, the primary analysts, and the decision makers for the issues that impact their lives. Academics have a responsibility to respect the populations they work with, to translate their experiences accurately, and to give space and priority to those community voices above and beyond their own. Being a translator is not the same as being a writer, but both are required in research-community relationships.

For the remainder of this chapter, I return to my original definition of the academic—a person working from within an institutional setting to

3. I return to this discussion in more detail in the next section.

contribute to dialogue on a subject through research, teaching others, and writing—and focus on how an academic can incorporate sex worker allyship in each of these three roles: (1) as someone conducting research at an academic institution, (2) as an educator who can create curricula and shape learning environments within academic institutions, and (3) as a colleague and participant within those institutions who can be an agent of change. In each role, there is a core purpose of being a conduit between the sex worker community and a larger audience. There are many roles that academics fill, as advocates and policy contributors, but the principles remain the same and the challenges are equally complicated. We cannot interact with a community without influencing it, and academics cannot be the only ones deriving benefit from that work.

### Academics as Researchers, Communities as Partners

Sex workers and the communities they form do not exist for the purpose of research. Sex workers exist, and the community bonds that they form are for the betterment of their own lives, not for others. The first question of every social science researcher should be, “How can I serve you?” not “How can you further my career?” Blogger Sarah Mann of *autocannibal*, in reflecting on her own experience researching sex work, noted:

Come September, sex worker organizations are flooded with requests for interviews, observations, ride-alongs, quotations, and various other trips by academics and students to the Sex Worker Zoo. Sex worker organizations are universally understaffed and underfunded, and they have shit to do, guys. They exist to serve sex workers, not to serve you. . . . When I pick up a research question about sex work, I make sure that answering it will directly, materially benefit the people I am studying. I make introductions for sex workers who want to go or return to school, I plan paid lectures or performances or panels, I do free work for organizations, I find spaces for sex workers to disseminate their own political messages, I bring sex workers’ demands to people with the power to meet them and ask how they’re going to do it, I get classes to buy books or other materials from a sex worker organization, [and] I sit on planning committees to stop arrests in my community. (2013)

Mann’s own description suggests that she is a thoughtful ally, thinking about her privilege and how she can leverage it beyond merely gaining community access. Certainly, some academics argue that their role is not to be an advocate

and that taking on such a role compromises objectivity. But the terms of this debate are misguided. Research is a political act, shaped by personal reflections and interpretations. Researchers who approach a population with their own desires and demands need to keep the principles of allyship in mind and be thoughtful about how their personal biases will impact the results. Those engaged in research should see their place as one not of stagnant knowledge but of learning, not of answering questions but of asking. This flexibility and openness enables researchers to create questions and methodologies that best respond to and represent the communities they are studying. However, achieving such fruitful social dialogue requires that academics recognize their privilege and limitations of experience.

Researchers who are not members of the marginalized populations they study are often viewed by colleagues and general audiences as selfless, and many approach the work with a desire to help. Many possess a generosity of spirit that should be applauded. And still, this well-intentioned impulse to help can ultimately replicate the marginalization those same groups struggle against. Even the best researchers must understand the impact that they will have on the communities they study and how their translation of that community's lived experience will have wide-reaching ramifications. Such researchers must understand where their good intentions end and the impact of their work begins, both on their direct subjects and on the wider discourse around them. Any researcher who desires to work with a marginalized population must question his or her motives and address why he or she seeks to do this work, with this population in particular. Researchers should acknowledge the personal benefits they gain from their research; it is not a selfless act to study and document the experiences of others. It is not a privilege to be researched.

Additionally, academics must push back against the wider public discourse that values certain people over others. Often, there is an assumption that it is the researchers and writers, not the researched communities and their members, who are experts. Academics, in place of community members, are extended entrée into policy and public spaces. According to journalist Alana Massey:

One of the many dangers of [seeing only researchers as experts] is the assumption that people who perform sexual services are incapable of intellectual or academic engagement with the topic of their own work. Sex workers are not just experts of their own experiences but also of the legal, political, and social landscapes where they operate. (Personal communication, September 15, 2015)

When granted the privilege of access to a community, researchers decide to either reinforce or undermine power disparities. The relationship between researchers and the communities they study can also replicate power dynamics of class and privilege, which can have a direct impact on the research itself. Academic certifications stamp an individual as an expert. Often researchers walk into spaces with a body of publications, post-nominal letters, and the power and funding of lofty institutions. As marginalized and stigmatized communities and individuals struggle for money, recognition, and basic access to resources, the power relationship can easily play out as a remarginalization. Relationships that replicate the very things many communities struggle against can blind researchers to these institutional elements and undermine the validity of their own research.

Too often, though, academics refuse to acknowledge or challenge these structures. Early in my life as a community organizer, I was speaking with a respected and frequently cited researcher on sex work. I was not only new to the world of community organizing; I was outmatched in the language of research. While I had a degree, the researcher spoke over me, dismissing my ethical concerns while at the same time demanding access to the people I was organizing. I tried to ask about methodology, confidentiality, and conflicts of interest, and in the rare instances when I was given a response, it was never a direct answer. I kept returning to one central question: How was he going to stay accountable to this population? How would we know that his research and eventual concluding results would do no harm? In response to these questions, he continued to repeat: "I am a researcher, not an advocate." Even then, I disagreed.

Despite his insistence on neutrality, his research enjoyed widespread readership among many audiences, including law enforcement and policy makers. From the platform of a funded professor at a large institution, he actively promoted his research methods, analysis, and results, ignoring the critiques leveled by sex worker community members and organizers (Jeffreys 2010; Lutnik 2013). Regardless of whether he saw himself as an advocate for or an opponent of the sex trade, his refusal to acknowledge sex workers' participation in the discourse only further compounded stigmatization.

Steps to avoid this researcher-first attitude can be employed from the beginning of the process, such as utilizing the knowledge of the community through an advisory or steering committee of community members to highlight common experiences and direct a deeper investigation where one is needed. Outside research takes time and often is far behind what a community already knows it is experiencing. Researchers gather interviews and numbers, make observations, and then eventually construct overarching themes, descriptions, and narratives based on that data.



## *Reflexivity and Coproduction of Knowledge*

In avoiding this researcher-first attitude, researchers must look at their own identity and biases when engaging in research on those who sell sex—a topic on which everyone has an opinion. As one researcher notes, there can be no “objective lens” when looking at an issue, only an articulated one (Haraway 1991). Taking into account personal positionality in relation to a research topic—including gender, race, sexuality, and myriad other identities and experiences—is a basic requirement of any research, especially for those who seek to better understand the power and privilege that they bring to their research. The researcher possesses an identity and, therefore, cannot simply act as a removed outsider collecting data.

Instead, I suggest that researchers engage in the “coproducing” of knowledge. Under this theory, individual researchers learn and allow the information they collect to inform and influence their own understanding of the world and of themselves (Berger and Guidroz 2014, 4). In this position, the researcher is a collaborator, recognizing that the expertise is in the hands of the subject. As a translator, the researcher simply relays and gathers that knowledge, with a firm understanding of its weight on both a professional and a personal level. Through this coproduction of knowledge, researchers can also turn anecdotal evidence, already known by the researched community, into “findings” that are recognized and heard by larger audiences (Shdaimah, Stahl, and Schram 2011). For example, many members in the sex worker community knew for years that law enforcement had been confiscating condoms and using them as evidence of prostitution-related crimes. Because of policing practices that de facto criminalized the possession of condoms, community members were wary of carrying them or accepting them when they were distributed by service providers. This powerful community knowledge had called for change, and outside research was instrumental to pushing for policy change.

After conducting extensive advocacy against this practice, community members and service providers utilized the research capacity of Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Open Society Foundations (OSF) to more widely document its extent and impact. This collaborative project found that in addition to the use of condoms as evidence, the confiscation or destruction of condoms was a prevalent policing tactic in multiple U.S. cities, as well as in countries around the globe (Human Rights Watch 2012; Open Society Foundations 2012). The report also documented the impact of the practice: that those profiled as sex workers were less likely to carry condoms, regardless of whether or not they intended to engage in commercial sex (Human Rights Watch 2012).



The HRW report serves as an example of thoughtful coproduced knowledge. As content producers, academics are given cache in spaces where, often, sex workers are not, or where “being outed” could expose someone to a host of negative consequences. Through outside research, what had previously been collective community-based knowledge was articulated to policy makers and public-health experts as a practice that was negatively affecting not just a few disparate individuals but whole communities on a global scale. These efforts took extensive collaboration to create a diverse body of resources, including personal narratives and extensive data collecting, that continues to contribute to advocacy work done on this subject.

### *Selecting Research Questions*

Examples like the HRW report are too often the exception instead of the rule. This lack of community-initiated research is best exemplified by the paucity of research topics often presented to sex worker communities and the organizations that serve them. Sex workers are constantly asked about their HIV/AIDS status and risk behaviors, psychological and sexual dysfunction, and sexual trauma. When sex workers want to talk about their previous employment experience in an office, they are asked about childhood sexual trauma. Instead of being asked to expand on their relationships with coworkers and the harm reduction that has resulted, sex workers are asked whether they have been assaulted by clients. As Jo Weldon, a longtime sex worker advocate, writes:

While every interviewer asks me whether I was sexually abused as a child, none of them have ever asked me a single question about the financial mindset, or even the financial motivation, involved in my decisions to work in the sex industry. No one has ever asked me if my parents argued about money in front of me, if I got an allowance, if I had a job in high school, if I was raised to value money as a form of status or simply as a means to an end, and so on. (2010, 147–148)

Seeing a dozen studies on sexual trauma, as opposed to the trauma of poverty, creates a narrative of what it means to be involved in the sex trade. This narrow focus further undermines the notion of objectivity, since researchers are actively selecting the questions and shaping the resulting discourse. When non–sex worker researchers set the parameters of the discussion, as opposed to the community identifying their own research needs, what issues are represented as “most pressing” are often not. Furthermore, this narrow scope of sex-work-related research is felt not only in the dearth of questions

asked but also in the distribution of funding and the services offered to those trading sex. When sex work is viewed as a poor or immoral decision instead of an economic issue, sex workers are often given therapy instead of access to jobs. When discussion of services is limited to preventing the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), the funding for legal services or job training is sparse.

### *Thinking about Methods*

As the growing number of studies that utilize community participatory action research illustrates, the sex worker community is capable of participating in research not just as subjects but as architects. Research on sex work, particularly street-based sex work, has been preoccupied with participants' victimization and exploitation. These same studies can become the ammunition cited by many who wish to abolish the sex trade. Misguided conclusions, poor methodology, and the impact of faulty research have had a deep and noted impact within the community and leads to increased stigma and distrust for further engagement. At a recent conference that brought together sixty members of the global sex worker community, Elena Jeffreys, president of Scarlet Alliance, expressed this sentiment by quoting Janelle Fawkes:

Unethical research on sex workers was identified as a key issue . . . and many examples were provided of research conducted on sex workers which does not seek to either improve conditions for sex workers or respect those involved. In particular, examples of studies in India, which include the forced testing of sex workers, contribute to the communities' feeling of mistrust and vulnerability. (Jeffreys 2010, 8)

Of note is how research that focuses on victimization is often rooted in poor methodology. Not informing participants to gain consent, ignoring very serious privacy concerns, or underlying judgment in the questions being asked can traumatize individuals who are forced to relive experiences of violence and dehumanization in the context of a society that views these experiences as a natural extension of the experience of trading sex.

Even in instances when research is not initiated by members of the sex worker community, researchers should strive to value the engagement of individual participants who give their time and energy and share intimate details of their lives and identities. Thoughtful collaborations support both the community and its individual members. Researchers must give as much respect and support to subjects as they give to those who are doing the subjecting.

Mutually beneficial research relationships can also lead to more robust and intimate research on a “hidden” community.<sup>4</sup> Samantha Majic, a researcher who has worked extensively with those who work in the sex trade, notes

I had to show [the people at those organizations] I was not coming in to “take what I needed and leave.” . . . And so at both organizations, I agreed that in exchange for access to their staffs, clients, documents and activities, I would assist their operations in any way I could. This reciprocal agreement proved invaluable not only for gaining access to the organizations but also for learning firsthand about how these organizations operate and maintain their oppositional political commitments. (2012, 147)

Thus, researchers should engage community members as colleagues on their projects rather than as simply subjects. The benefit of doing so can lead the efforts to connect to a diverse spectrum of respondents. Sex work research suffers from intense selection bias. Academic researchers, particularly social scientists, often access hidden populations through service providers and other gatekeepers, ignoring the reality that most hidden populations find hiding a part of their survival. This can lead to researchers only reaching a small proportion of the community. For example, collaborating with a syringe-exchange service is (typically) not going to put a researcher in touch with non-drug-using participants. Similarly, relying on jails or diversion programs to find a sample of sex workers often biases the sample toward the experience of not just street-based sex workers but street-based sex workers who are most at risk for being profiled and policed. Attending a Prostitutes Anonymous meeting and asking how many people want to leave prostitution will lead one to a clear answer but not an unbiased one. As researcher and academic Ronald Weitzer notes in his critique of some of the wildly divergent and problematic methodology in studies on prostitution, “biased procedures yield warped conclusions” (2010, 20).

Recent social science research by John Jay and the Center for Court Innovation used a number of community members as gatekeepers to access and reach youth who trade sex (Curtis et al. 2008). They then utilized

4. A population can be defined as “hidden” when no census or sampling frame of the population exists, and when identification as a member of the population holds risk—often because membership in the population involves behavior that is stigmatized or illegal. These two characteristics mean that the size of the hidden population is often unknown, because members of the population may be hesitant to identify themselves as such. For more, see Heckathorn 1997.

respondent-driven sampling,<sup>5</sup> a recruitment method that is more commonly used in public-health research than in the social sciences. Doing so, they were able to recruit a broader range of participants, many who typically are not visible to researchers because of criminalization and marginalization (Curtis et al. 2008, 6). The project also paid youth as interlocutors, a process that values participants' time and contribution to the project and cannot be underscored enough. While the number of debates around payment for participation warrants its own book, respecting people's time often requires compensating them for their time and energy. When researchers conduct interviews, they are essentially asking for the expertise of an individual to inform their professional work. If we see each participant in the research process as a stakeholder, that perspective must include valuing the time of those contributing their experience as subjects. Not doing so, especially when researchers are being paid for their labor, disrespects the contributions of individual members of the community and devalues their time, while valuing the time of the researcher.

Ric Curtis and his colleagues' project has received considerable attention, but similar research has also been undertaken by organizations already serving sex worker communities. The Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP; 2011) in Chicago developed a participatory action-research project to explore the violence experienced by young women trading sex. With the support of an outside researcher who trained community members on conducting research, the organization was able to build a mutually supportive partnership. The project's development was an evolving, multistep process that depended on research design skills while simultaneously keeping the final decision-making power and actual implementation with members of the affected community. The process took almost a full year and used direct outreach, focus groups, and journal-based responses from community members who did not come to the YWEP offices for services. In the end, the project's findings vastly enriched the way in which we understand how young women in the sex trade experience violence and trauma. Innovatively, questions about violence and trauma were paired with questions about healing and resistance, contributing to a more holistic and empowering experience for participants. Young women who traded sex were represented, then, as active decision makers, coping the best way they could against immeasurable circumstances, and not simply passive victims. The results also identified that this community often shares best practices knowledge about self-care. Thus, the research process, which was dependent on peer support and was community-driven,

5. Also known as "snowball sampling," this method involves asking participants to reach out to friends as a method to gather more participants.

incorporated and dispersed this kind of knowledge informally. Researchers can also use other accessible formats, such as zines or pamphlets, to ensure that their findings reach and give something of value back to the communities they research, alongside informing policy makers, improving service provisions, and providing an example that we all can learn from.

There is no question that academics influence public discussions; the question is whether academics acknowledge and reflect on the extent to which their work can and will influence the lives of others. Every choice made in research, from methodology to the questions asked to the analysis and dissemination, is a decision, no matter how passively made. Not only can research have a direct, negative impact on study participants; it can have severe ramifications for the wider population from which the participants are drawn. The way research is contextualized (or not) and who participates in analysis influences its interpretations. Which aspects of research are highlighted, and how and in which forums it is disseminated, can point to very different cultural understandings, policy changes, and precedence for interaction, which may perpetuate stigma and harm. Research should be not only a process of understanding others but also a constant process of self-reflection. Whether or not an academic decides to identify as an ally, there must be awareness of what kind of impact their process, work, and research will have on the population.

## Academics as Teachers

Sex work is increasingly covered as a topic in a number of different disciplines. A Google search finds classes being taught on everything from Sex Work for the Middle Classes (Sociology, Columbia University) to The Gendered Body: Sex, Pleasure, and Sex Work (Women's Studies, Rutgers University), to Sex Work and Sex Workers (Labour Studies, Brock University). As teachers, academics have the privilege of being able to engage with eager students, access a variety of resources, and disseminate information to a wider audience about a subject.

Educators who want to practice allyship should, as in a research context, build community-centered syllabi and lesson plans. This work begins in the framing and theoretical basis for a course that discusses sex work. An instructor's choice to contextualize sex work within a specific discipline, discourse, or theory can color and essentialize the lived experiences of those discussed and preclude academics from exploring nuance that does not fit within their disciplinary framework. Claiming, for example, that sex work is a feminist issue, versus an economic-justice issue or one of sexual freedom, will frame the discussion. This limited view can keep the conversation in the abstract

instead of in the context of a lived reality. It is not enough for an academic to sit on the sidelines in a dialogue that has deep social ramifications and consider this “neutrality.” By engaging on a topic at all, academics are already inserting themselves into the dialogue, and the failure to reflect on that engagement as someone from outside the community is simply an excuse to not be accountable for the impact that one has.

By using a more nuanced and grounded perspective, academics can connect experiences to a wider context and framework for the outside audience. A program on informal labor covering sex work can speak to the experiences of cash economies and lack of access to financial institutions, which are shared by street vendors. Within the framework of intimate professional relationships, we can explore how the parameters of a client–service provider relationship differ between sex workers and therapists. As a question of race, we can look at the incomes of exotic dancers from different ethnic backgrounds and see how that compares to inequities in other service jobs.

Academics also connect overarching theories and even develop language to make what might be a foreign concept to a larger audience more accessible. For example, Heidi Hoefinger (2013) translates a local experience and uses the label “professional girlfriends” to underscore the cultural differences between American understandings of sex work and a Cambodian one. American audiences may recognize “sex worker” as signifying a more explicit sex-for-resources transaction. In contrast, there are many examples of terminology that is distinctly used to undermine the experience of those trading sex. Using terms such as “prostituted” removes agency from an individual. Being intentional about those framing decisions is essential to how we understand newly introduced concepts.

As in research, being thoughtful about who is represented as an expert is another intentional decision that can change the way sex work is presented. Too often, professors rely on their peers, using the voices of academics and their mediated, distant research to tell the stories of these communities. When professors rely only on the voices of other academics and researchers, labeling them as experts, they dislocate the center of knowledge from a stigmatized community. This is simply another table at which sex workers should be given a seat. When creating curricula, teachers can take a critical look at their syllabi and book lists and consider what messages the listed resources convey about that community and how students should incorporate voices from within. When those on whom the conversation centers cannot be present, it is any academic ally’s responsibility to ensure that community-identified voices are front and center. This task, of course, means taking the time to meet with community members, service providers, and others to identify exactly *what* those priorities are and to become familiar with texts

that originate from within the community. Using books and media created by community members and their allies can provide the most intimate, nuanced understandings of the experience or identity being discussed. Incorporating the personal narratives of sex workers gives depth to the conversation, locating it within the experiences and voices of those affected. For example, exploring sex work as work is central to the film *Live, Nude Girls Unite* (2014) and Siobhan Brooks's (2010) book *Unequal Desires*. Books like *Johns, Marks, Tricks, and Chickenhawks* (Sterry and Martin 2013) and Michele Tea's (2004) graphic novel *Rent Girl* explore experiences of sex work outside of the empowerment-enslavement paradigm, which comes from external, rather than internal, voices. The film *A Kiss for Gabriela* (2013) explores the experience of Gabriela Leite, a longtime sex worker, an organizer, and eventually a political candidate. Memoirs like Janet Mock's (2014) *Redefining Realness* and Toni Newman's (2011) *I Rise* explore themes of intersectionality around race and trans experience that can contextualize sex work in myriad ways. When we critically engage with the first person, we are forced to connect across the chasm that can separate a researcher from a subject and acknowledge that the "voiceless" are speaking loud and clear.

It is also essential to convey to students the importance and practice of allyship and mutual partnership. When asking students to reach out to community groups, it must be understood that it takes time to meet those requests for information. Each request must be paired with a clear understanding of what the community can expect to receive in return. Professors can cultivate a culture of "giving back" among students and guide them to give back in ways that expand organizational capacity rather than stress it. When students become more involved as volunteers or interns, they can provide labor and support to local organizations and, through those interactions, build their own knowledge in real-life, off-campus settings. When asked to simply take an hour of a community group's time, we are exploiting goodwill and possibly damaging that organization's view of what is possible with outside researchers. Modeling allyship means requiring students to engage with the question "What can I offer in exchange for my learning?"

By creating a community-informed learning space, instructors can also contribute to a space that is safe for sex workers who might be present in the classroom—namely, their students. The population of students who engage in some form of sex work is not small; a survey in the United Kingdom of two hundred exotic dancers found that 29 percent were pursuing some form of education (Johnston 2014). There are many reasons why students may engage in sex work while attending university, but perhaps the most obvious one is cost. From 1985 to 2013, the cost of higher education rose 528 percent, compared to only a 121 percent rise in the consumer price index (Jamrisko



and Kolet 2013). Coupled with a young adult population facing a disproportionately high unemployment rate of 15 percent (Dewan 2014), the need to find work that can both accommodate a student schedule and provide a high-enough wage can be daunting. For international students, visa restrictions on working can further exacerbate the high cost of attending school.

Creating a safe space for students means understanding that there are a range of experiences in the room and that spaces that shame or stigmatize those in the sex trade only make it harder to access education. One sex worker with whom I worked described a very common classroom experience:

Any time a professor addressed sex work around me, they came from the assumption that there were no actual, current workers in the room or that loudmouth me was the only one. And sadly, thinking that you're speaking wholly in the abstract does not lead to careful, considerate, or, frankly, helpful speech. . . . But I know that I'm far from the only one to have started working without a whole lot of understanding of the sex trades—it would have made my experience a lot less burdensome if I hadn't had the entire responsibility for educating my teachers and peers in the idea that sex workers were all around them.<sup>6</sup>

Vivienne,<sup>7</sup> another student and community member of Sex Worker Action New York (SWANK), echoed this experience:

Hiding in plain sight gave me a unique perspective on things. I was able to feel like a fly on the wall because no one ever assumed that I was often coming directly from or going immediately to work. But that gets wearing after a while, and realizing that no one suspects that you're in the sex trade because you carry yourself a certain way, or [realizing that] they were making judgments, can push you to bury your secret even further. I was constantly terrified that someone would guess or, even worse, find my ad.<sup>8</sup>

Simply inviting speakers to discuss the many forms of trading sex in a non-judgmental way can alert students engaged in some kind of sexual exchange to the existence of information, resources, and community and where to find them. Away at college or in new educational spaces, students may be

6. Unnamed sex worker, interview by the author, August 30, 2015.

7. This and all other interviewee names are pseudonyms.

8. Vivienne, interview by the author, September 1, 2014.

embracing their autonomy and self-determination for the first time. Professors and administrators should take seriously the importance of allowing students to connect with resources to meet their personal and academic needs, including their needs as sex workers.

Just as much as we need to create private spaces for disclosure and connection to opportunities outside of campus, this cannot be in lieu of a public space of acceptance. The use of frameworks and language, and the voices that are uplifted, all contribute to an atmosphere in which students are prepared to learn from experts and value their experiences, which often have to fight through complex power dynamics to appear at all.

Academics often must be creative finding ways to offer support. Not everyone has a stipend to offer. Universities often have access to funding for stipends, contracts, or speaking fees, meeting and office spaces, technology centers, and food supplies, all of which can make a huge difference to organizations. Even providing a no-cost copy option can make a difference to organizations that must be creative in supporting their day-to-day operations. Sex worker community organizations and their members are often criminalized and policed. Providing safe spaces, either through in-kind resources or through creating a nonjudgmental classroom space, are two tangible ways in which academics who are teachers can also practice allyship.

### Academics as Institutional Actors

Allyship does not end with being a conscientious researcher or creating a safe space in the classroom. The final role of any ally is not just to demonstrate to the community that they are invested in mutual benefit but to be an ambassador for that work within an academic's own community—namely, within the research or educational institutions (often universities) that employ them. Academia is a profession with many barriers to entry, and it is mostly populated by people coming from a place of social and economic privilege. As such, it can be difficult for members of researched and marginalized communities to access academic settings or to be respected when they do. Further, marginalized communities and the organizations that serve them have their own goals and tasks to which they must attend. Repeatedly teaching “cultural competency” is taxing and very often serves only the needs of an outside audience, not the direct goals of the community.

Most frustratingly, this work is often unpaid and thankless. When and where sex workers cannot participate directly or openly,<sup>9</sup> such as in

9. I am not suggesting that sex workers are not present at these meetings. Indeed, while much has been made of the number of college and university students who engage in sex work to

department meetings, classes, or curriculum development, it is the responsibility of academic allies to check their own communities by holding colleagues accountable, questioning assumptions and biases, educating peers, and supporting the development of an inclusive environment. Academic allies should think of this process as a type of peer review. Critiquing dominant research, lending a voice to the needs of marginalized and, especially, criminalized populations, and demanding that academic institutions construct safe spaces for all are the most basic tenets of allyship.

Certainly, this type of allyship is not without challenges, even in academia. The politicization found in many academic departments and the way in which tenure is withheld and distributed in certain institutions increase the consequences of speaking up. The risks faculty may have to take to demand accountability from an institution, especially if they are seeking tenure, can demand a level of personal commitment and sacrifice that some may not have or be able to afford. As Martin Monto notes in Chapter 11, there are also personal risks taken when a researcher decides to focus on a subject such as sex work. In one instance, his public discussion of his findings led to the accusation “Whose side are you on?” and, in other instances, to the assumption that he was a client. Simple proximity to a criminalized community can certainly affect interpersonal dynamics. Allies can be perceived as being “too involved” and rendered ineffective. At some point, allies must consider the question of how much allyship will influence their own lives. Yet without allies who are willing to take such risks, sex workers and sex worker organizations have limited power in effecting the change they would like to see from universities.

That sex workers and sex worker organizations want institutional change within universities’ structures is perhaps surprising, but, as discussed, many sex workers are students. Their lives are affected by the institutions’ policies surrounding students engaging in sex work and responses that institutions have when a student is outed.

Similarly, since universities do support, in some way, most research, the structures and policies they exercise around transparency, institutional review boards, and similar related entities are of concern for sex workers and their communities. For example, in 2011, the New York chapters of the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP-NYC) and SWANK wanted to obtain ethics records and results related to research done on New York City–based indoor

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pay for increasing tuition, the same question has not been directed at the changing face of academics themselves. Academia is becoming more dependent on adjunct labor, and adjuncts who are paid in bulk per course often do face economic uncertainty. Therefore, it is not unthinkable that, like their students, a proportion engage in sex work to make ends meet.

workers by Columbia University professor Sudhir Venkatesh. Venkatesh's findings, which were published in the popular magazine *Wired*, contained a number of claims about the lives of New York City–based sex workers, including regurgitated misinformation on rates of violence, condomless sex, and online advertising (Venkatesh 2011). However, despite the fact that Venkatesh reported that these findings came after years of research and following 290 sex workers, no one in the two organizations or in members' extended networks had ever been contacted by the researcher. SWOP-NYC and SWANK approached the institutional review board<sup>10</sup> of Columbia University to learn more about Venkatesh's research protocol and met with one dead end after another. Despite reaching out to his department, the institutional review board, and relevant professional associations, none of these bodies would respond to questions about his methods or research protocols (SWOP-NYC 2013). Academics who view themselves as allies must work to change such structures and entities so that they value transparency and are accountable to the communities involved in research.

Academics can also be powerful advocates in the fight against the conditions that increase the vulnerability of those in the sex trade. Many private institutions have morality clauses, which directly bar those engaged in sex work from attending (if they are discovered). There is also the basic question of addressing economic injustice.<sup>11</sup> As noted, rising tuition costs do motivate students to enter the sex trade. In the spring of 2014, the unemployment rate for college graduates was half that of high-school graduates (3.2 percent compared to 6.5 percent; Jobs Report 2014). But getting that degree too often saddles students with debt: in the United States, 71 percent of students walk away from an undergraduate program with debt, averaging over \$29,000, and the trend is not in the favor of students. In the four years from 2008 to 2012, the average debt increased 6 percent each year. Meanwhile, the need to fund available education opportunities is a common reason why individuals pursue sex work. Lane, a SWANK member, observed that

people make a lot of jokes about the prevalence of NYU [New York University] girls on sugar-daddy sites and doubling as escorts and strippers, as if they're all just thrill-seeking degenerate rich kids. But

10. Institutional review boards are committees established at the university level to oversee and monitor the ethics of research that involves human subjects.

11. While this chapter focuses on university settings, access to K–12 education is an often articulated need for youth who are engaged in the sex trade. There is a range of reasons why especially housing-unstable and LGBTQ youth are unable to access education—reasons that a discussion of tuition does not begin to touch. This topic deserves its own dedicated discussion.

the truth is, NYU was prohibitively expensive, and the cost of tuition was one of many contributing factors in my decision to do sex work.<sup>12</sup>

Lack of access to affordable education bars many people from higher-wage jobs and prevents many from leaving the sex trade. Academic institutions must be reformed to make them more accessible, cost-effective, and open to more students. This will increase educational opportunities, which, in turn, will support those same students' economic opportunities upon graduation. Many of the goals of sex worker rights activists are simple goals of economic justice. Allied academics can advocate for lower tuition fees, more financial support, and fewer structural barriers to entry, as well as reduce financial barriers to participation in their own classes by selecting low-cost texts or creating lending libraries. Addressing the factors that make academic advancement prohibitively expensive and unavailable to so many people is a space in which academics can act not just as allies to a niche cause but as collaborators in a larger struggle.

## Conclusion

Academics, as professors, researchers, and administrators, affect the lives of those in the sex trade in ways that are complex and multilayered. As we have examined, academic allyship can take on many forms, and all of those roles have their own pitfalls and challenges around ethics, engagement, and responsibility. They have the rippling power to affect, directly and indirectly, populations as a whole as well as the lived, daily experiences of many they will never meet. As researchers, allies can be the conduit through which knowledge about a community is transferred to diverse audiences, including policy makers. Researchers who are allies to sex worker communities need to do more than conduct ethical research; they need to ensure that their findings are honest and reflective of sex workers' lived experiences and that resulting publications are accessible—to both marginalized populations and policy makers. I cannot count the number of articles and studies I have participated in that are now on the opposite side of a paywall I cannot scale.

As professors, academics have opportunities to create safe spaces to foster understanding and exploration of nuanced and complicated topics. Professors can provide a safe environment, which many in the sex trade have never had. As colleagues, academics can do the purest job of an ally and hold their own communities accountable. Academics can change institutions with power that sex worker communities will never have and never should. The people

12. Lane, interview by the author, August 27, 2014.

within an institution know it best and know its strengths, weaknesses, and points for change. Academics are the best-poised actors to influence their communities, and that is not a role that should be taken lightly.

As stakeholders in the academic system, academics can advocate for social and economic justice from within. Economic justice is one of the core tenets of the sex workers' rights movement, and those in academia must commit to making sure that attending higher education is not a contributing factor that pushes young people into sex work or leaves them vulnerable to economic exploitation. Professors can hold their own institutions and employers accountable for contributions to economic injustice; this can be the most radical and powerful step one can take as an ally.

Academics play an invaluable role in social change. The base of what academics do is to translate concepts and experiences to new audiences, expanding and shaping their understanding along the way. It cannot be said enough that this is a vital element to impactful social change. Many academics and researchers approach this role with a laudable dedication to the communities they "target," and they operate with service, first and foremost, in mind. Being an advocate to the communities with which one works is not simply the work of being an ally; it is a commitment to respecting human dignity. It is a commitment to fully understand the challenges marginalized groups face, and it is an appreciation of their resiliency. When faced with barriers, disenfranchised communities work tirelessly to make change and build resilience. When academics commit to becoming allies, those efforts can be amplified in untold ways.

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